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\Doomsday Book\Stability

The Construction of Instability

Merely to add new offensive vehicles and warheads is not to increase (Type I) deterrence of nuclear attack, though it may increase the “second-strike” forces likely to survive an adversary’s first strike, and thus the likely damage to the attacker.

The incentive to preempt depends on the **difference** to the attacker of his expected damage from striking first and the damage he expects if he strikes second. Both of these levels of damage may go up for the SU when the US adds new forces; but the difference might increase or decrease. If it increases, the incentive for the SU to preempt may increase, despite or because of the increase in the US.

Thus, if we added a lot of vulnerable offensive forces (like ground-based soft IRBMs, or soft ICBMs like Atlas or Titan, or even (against large and accurate Soviet ICBMs) Minuteman or MX—against mainly land-based Soviet ICBMs—that would increase the difference between a first- and a second-strike for **both** sides, thus increasing the incentive to preempt for **both**. (See my “Crude Analysis” paper.)

This is what we actually did. Was it totally “irrational,” ignoring the reduction in stability and thus the reduction in the assurance that we would not be attacked, increasing the chance that our Type I deterrence would fail in a crisis?

Actually, I believe that a continuing incentive to increase instability in this way was that it increased or maintained our Type II deterrence into an era of “parity”¹ by maintaining a threat of US preemptive attack in a crisis defined by US FU threats or attacks in a regional conflict. Such a US tactical nuclear attack against a Soviet client or ally, or even the threat of it, would immediately raise on both sides the fear (or “concern”) of all-out war precisely because of the unstable balance and the incentives on both sides to preempt. (“Both sides” is important here, because neither has much incentive to preempt, given large-scale parity, except on the belief that the other might preempt. If the difference between first- and second-strike existed only on one side—its own forces being essentially invulnerable, not subject to disarming by the other (say, Polaris submarines!)—then it would be very implausible that the other was attacking or would attack first; and without plausibly being able to claim that fear, its own threats to preempt

¹ (estimated to exist—or even to be Soviet superiority—by USAF in 1958-61, and which actually did exist after 1963. Late-61 to mid-63, covering the fall Berlin crisis and the Cuban missile crisis, was a brief period of consensually-recognized US “superiority”—which JFK and his advisors like McGeorge Bundy did exploit, despite their denials—though privately JFK didn’t want to test it to the point of actually invading Cuba)

in order to gain the advantage of a first strike rather than be struck would be implausible, even if the other responded in a limited way with nuclear weapons to its own FU of nuclear weapons.

We had found, in China (Chinese Communist victories over our ally, the Nationalists, without our using nuclear weapons) and in Korea that conventional war did not have to become nuclear, either in a limited or all-out way. This contradicted early predictions in the nuclear era that any armed conflict would have to be nuclear. Vietnam later confirmed that, where the US even accepted defeat (rather than stalemate, as in Korea, or the defeat of a non-American ally in China). Likewise the Taiwan Straits Crises. The Cuban missile crisis seemed further confirmation, though only one superpower casualty was involved. (Both the US and Khrushchev overestimated what they could do to the other before and without nuclear weapons being invoked! In fact, they came within a hands-breadth of an explosion. But then, both Korea and Vietnam came closer, as did the Straits, than the public realized.)

So the nuclear system appeared to be relatively stable against conventional attacks that did not threaten either side (the US, in particular) with imminent major defeat. (A North Vietnamese attack across the DMZ in 1956-65 would have been a different story. Or, it turns out, a US invasion of Cuba in 1962!)

But that was obviously not reliable for a tactical nuclear attack, by either side: and the US was the only one likely to be in a conflict where it was inferior locally in conventional strength (because of the far-flung nature of our “commitments” and “interests,” up to the borders of the Soviet Bloc and China (or, with Berlin, even inside their Bloc). Cuba was the case where the SU attempted to imitate this, in “our” hemisphere: and attempted to do it the same way we did, with nuclear weapons that were not entirely under SU control!

Instability—both in the sense of a centralized incentive to preempt, and a possibility of unauthorized or delegated action—served the credibility of the US threat to escalate to all-out attacks on the Soviets if they made a nuclear response to our local use of nuclear weapons (in Indochina, Taiwan Straits, Korea, Iran, Berlin, Germany, Iraq/Kuwait). In fact, it was essential to this back-up threat, which was essential to the credibility of our FU threats against SU allies.

(We no longer make such threats—since the SU doesn’t exist and Russia hasn’t extended an “umbrella” abroad—so we don’t need this instability any more or the threat of FS against Russia: except for the possible defense of Georgia and Ukraine, if they become part of NATO. That is an incentive to promote the latter, for those who want to preserve a rationale for our FS forces: USAF and its MIC! This at the cost of preserving Doomsday Machines, instability and FS incentives on both sides, and making non-proliferation impossible.)

Supposed Incentives to preempt:

To the non-military eye, the “difference” in size of force to be delivered and the expected damage may seem “insignificant, meaningless, unimportant” when the levels of damage are enormous in either case. And “enormous” might mean ten warheads delivered, ten cities destroyed (see McGeorge Bundy: ‘a disaster beyond history’) (very difficult to prevent, if the pre-attack arsenal is 50-100 or even less (see McNamara-Nitze).

(The JCS prediction to JFK in 1961 that a first strike would lead to only ten million dead in the US—in the thermonuclear age!—seemed to rest on the prediction that the Soviets could deliver only one or two large warheads on the US, less than five, after a US first strike. Not so unrealistic in 1961, IF you accepted the reality that the Army-Navy estimates of “a few” (actually, four) soft ICBMs in the Soviet Union. (What of Soviet subs at sea? Were there any, on regular patrol? Or could they all be destroyed in port, by a US surprise attack?) But difficult for the Air Force or SAC to maintain, given their estimates! Why did the Kaysen/Rowen/Kaufmann first strike plan expect casualties in the US even that high? (Uncertainty about the estimate of SU ICBMs?)

But Kahn, and it seems Nitze (see his memoir) stressed the “difference” between 10 million dead and “winning” (having much larger forces after the first exchange) and 90 million dead and losing (assuming an SU FS aimed at cities?—contrary to Nitze’s and Kahn’s assumptions about a “rational” FS coercive strategy—and a lack of second-strike CF (counterforce) capability on the US side. See Nitze:

“The difference” Kahn would say, “is 100 million people” (and, he claimed, with an argument that was less than compelling, except to him, that there would be a big difference in post-attack “recovery”). That does, indeed, look hard to ignore; yet not so hard for most people to ignore, in terms of basing policy and preparations on the pursuit of that difference, when it is a difference between 70 million dead and 170 million dead (or even, less excusably perhaps, when it is a difference between 10 million and 110 million.)

Kahn’s argument for a FS capability—or at least, a plausible/credible FS threat capability (which he presumed depended on a plausible effort and capability to keep damage to the attacker down—to the 10-20 million range (!) (contrary to the argument of Edward Rhodes, Power and MADness) rested in part on his claim that it was or should be “worth it, acceptable” to lose ten million American dead, or more, to prevent Soviet conquest and exploitation of West Europe.

“How many would you be willing to risk, or lose, sacrifice” he would ask elite audiences (!) to prevent Soviet occupation of Europe?

(He didn’t ask: to hold on to South Vietnam. To hold Berlin itself? To prevent Soviet occupation of northern Iran?)

This kind of calculation was closely related to the assumption by AJW (Wohlstetter) that the Soviets might well (or would probably) be willing to sacrifice the number of lives they had lost in World War II—twenty million or more: “which they know they recovered from very well” (!)—to disarm and destroy the US, their only obstacle (?) to world domination. (And, he sometimes acknowledged—more critically than he seemed to recognize—the only military threat to their own survival, the only nation that posed a threat of a US FS, preemptive or escalatory or preventive. This latter consideration was created by our own “deterrent” posture and threats, and could have been eliminated for the Soviets, as an incentive to attack us, by a change in US policy.

(World domination is challenged not only by a superpower opponent, as the US found in Vietnam, and the Soviets found in Afghanistan and Chechnya. But domination of West Europe—or of the Middle East?— would have been a great prize. In reality, did the Soviets ever privately lust after that, except as the possible reward of a desperate attack on their part, not worth the risk except in a desperate crisis?)

This assumption about the Russians seemed to come more easily to a Trotskyist—like Wohlstetter (a secret of his past, and Roberta’s)—or a Pole like Brzezinski (or Richard Pipes?). (Nitze: German).

My discussions in Russia did seem to indicate that it ignored the fact that the experience of WWII left memories that caused Russians to shudder (despite the triumphant ending); and moreover, that the deaths had been inflicted over four years, not in a night, simultaneously.

AJW’s investigations and analysis indicated that it could be very difficult to assure that level of damage—he was assuming that a high probability of it was essential to deter Soviets from the “temptation” of eliminating their chief opponent—against a well-planned Soviet attack, especially a coercive one (not a likely Soviet choice, any more than a USAF preference). (Nitze was taken with the prospects of a coercive strategy by either side; it was later the basis for his warnings—as a member of the Committee on the Present Danger—about a Soviet “first strike capability” and intention. My own BNSP—under his authority in ISA—may have encouraged him in this, regrettably.)

(I, on the other hand, saw it only as 1) a desperate second-strike strategy, better than SAC’s or CINCPAC’s, with some small chance of limiting damage and ending the war; and more primarily, as (2) a basis for demanding presidential or centralized C3 survivability so as to exercise choice and control during the war, and thus requiring and permitting PALs on weapons to prevent decentralized initiatives (and low-level false alarms or unauthorized action), foregoing delegation, along with survivable C3. And (3) a rationale for forgoing initial attacks on cities (and China), perhaps saving them entirely. (Thus saving Soviet and Chinese lives from immediate death from blast and radiation, greatly lowering (with air bursts) fallout deaths in Europe and neutrals (and, unknown to me, averting nuclear winter!) even if it did not prevent attacks on US cities!

(Fat chance we would forego attacks on cities if our cities were attacked! As they would be. But maybe, in a second strike, we would be able to wreak less damage on cities than we would in a first strike or with our current strategy, which would target cities in the initial waves of either a first or second strike. In effect, I was not proposing to base deterrence on a massive threat of direct attacks on Soviet cities, even in a second strike (as minimum deterrence advocates tended to do): a sizeable attack on Soviet military targets, as our initial “response,” would do enough damage to be deterrent, combined with a survivable threat against cities (which I hoped—not with much basis, to be sure, in the immediate future, without a lot of re-indoctrination of our forces and leaders—would not be executed.)

However, it is not only civilian militarists like Herman Kahn (and Nitze) who see “a big difference” between first- and second-strike outcomes even when both involve scores (or hundreds) of millions of US and allied dead. The military (especially air force and missile forces) easily accept “damage-limiting” and “prevailing” (in the limited sense of maintaining larger residual forces than the opponent, even amidst general or worldwide devastation) as their job to be pursued and prepared for (in force structure and plans).

US warhead arsenals cannot be reduced below some 1500-2000 on alert—several times the scale of a Doomsday Machine-- **without giving up the damage-limiting objective.** That could “in theory” (ignoring bureaucratic and political resistance) be based on a recognition that pursuing damage-limitation against Russians is (and has been for over forty years) both infeasible, dangerous (and for at least twenty years, totally unnecessary even for maintaining US global hegemony) and promoting proliferation.

Yet those who wish to maintain our present forces can call on arguments that have great resonance with the public, as well as with the military and industry (who perceive benefits to them in maintaining the forces). To forego damage-limiting seems reckless, dangerous (even though this objective is generally esoteric with respect to the public, which has scarcely heard of it; it can be made to seem plausible, when it is necessary to discuss it at all because of challenge by “abolitionists”).

As a unilateral measure (sensible though this would be) it is almost inconceivable politically. And the Russians are not currently as open to it as they surely were under Gorbachev and even Yeltsin. (It seems that the Soviets recognized the infeasibility of real damage reduction, and even the risk of nuclear winter, long before anyone in the US recognized the latter.) But that is in face of the Bush-Obama administrations, who have shown no inclination at all toward large reductions.

As a joint measure—if the US could be brought to accept that—it could probably overcome the current arguments against it. After all, the advantage of gaining a huge inspected reduction in Russian forces threatening us, and of lowering the risk of all-out war altogether, can be made pretty obvious.

But that would call for sequencing reductions in favor of eliminating vulnerable forces first, eliminating US land-based missiles (rather than the incredibly stupid FAS proposal

to get rid of Trident submarines, leaving land-based forces!). To focus only on the objective of abolition, ignoring effects on stability (on first-strike incentives) would be neither politically or intellectually persuasive, or politically feasible.

So the question is: is it politically feasible to get rid of the USAF land-based missiles (given their "importance" to the Air Force—like Kashmir to India!—and their employment contributions in northern states?!) and to lower the number of Trident warheads to the point where they do not constitute a major threat to Soviet land-based missiles?